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ABSTRACT

An organic approach to style in acting can lend credibility and power to performances and can enhance the clarity and extent of what is communicated to audiences about other social worlds. The organic approach is based on the following principles: mental experience and expressive behavior are inseparable and reciprocal: experience in either mode (mental or expressive) automatically provokes correlated behavior in the other: actors are not capable of creating the full illusion of human behavior on stage by purely imitative means: and the primary device for controlling the flow of expression at an adequate level is the stream of perception-feeling-thought, often called "sub-text." Using an organic approach to dealing with style calls for these acting techniques: (1) understanding the general conventions of the period: (2) finding the extent to which that style is the style of the world of the play: (3) synthesizing a general style from the historical world and the playwright's world: (4) individualizing each aspect of the play through the character's history, goals, motives, and perception habits: (5) using the individualization as the basic communicative device, acting a set of attitudes and expectations within and "against" the general style: and (6) making the set of attitudes and expectations habitual and then forgetting them. (AEA)

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THE ORGANIC APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF STYLE IN ACTING

Generally speaking, we have not done well in dealing with style, either on the stage or in the classroom. It's true, there have been a few brilliant analyses of dramaturgic style and occasional moments of intuitive brilliance in staging style, but we do not understand style well so we usually do not handle it well. This morning, I reported the findings of a lengthy project to understand and precisely define style. Here I will deal with more specific problems and techniques.

First, I want to remind you that there are no "style-less" plays. Whenever we work in the theatre, we must face the problem of style. Our special topic today is 17th-century comedy style, but the comments I will make apply equally to all drama. The 17th century is a very difficult period for us to deal with, not because the style is inherently problematic

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but because the world of 17th-centruy comedy is so alien to us. No style is inherently problematic. In style, all is relative. Difficulty springs from divergence between our world and the world of the play.

Not only do most of us lack information about these alien worlds, but, when we are given the information, we usually find ourselves unable to make deep and useful sense of it. After all, the information which can be passed with reasonable ease from scholar to director and from director to actor is not the style; it is merely the most obvious, superficial expression of the style. What matters most, what generates style in costume and behavior, are special ways of understanding the world, attitudes toward it, sets of goals, and repertoires of more-or-less apt strategies for coping with the perceived world. All these are internal. The real work of acting in appropriate style begins with a comprehension and "re-construction" of these internal factors. Knowledge of the historically correct costume and gesture are important but they will not suffice.

This seems obvious enough, but it is not so to everyone. A few years ago, sitting on a committee to judge graduate comprehensive exams, I was stunned by the answers to this question: "What approach to acting would be appropriate for each of the following: The Death of a Salesman, Hamlet, and The Way of the World?" What amazed and worried me was the near unanimity of this answer: "For Salesman, I would use the Stanislavsky approach; for Hamlet, I would have to learn to speak verse; for Way of the World, I would have to learn to stand well and to handle a handkerchief." What a travesty. What a mis-understanding of acting and of style is revealed here!

The question was a "trick" question, of course. It is generally

accepted that a correct answer specifies the organic approach as equally appropriate, indeed necessary, for any of these three plays and almost any other you can name. The only alternative approach ever proposed is the "imitative" and, though it is frequently used by default, I know of no one who recommends it. The organic approach is not committed to any style. It is not inappropriate for any style. It is the way acting is done when it is done well.

Where does this confusion about style and acting technique spring from? I assume that it is the result of our failure as teachers to deal both with the fundamentals of acting theory and style theory. You can demolish almost any doctoral candidate with a penetrating question on either matter. If the truth be known, this is the case with most faculty too.

There is not time here to discuss the organic approach thoroughly. Let me just remind you of a few fundamentals: in acting, the basic, indeed the only, problem is to create appropriate expressive behavior; any approach which achieves this is a good approach. The organic approach, so far as we can tell, is the only approach which achieves this consistently and convincingly. The organic approach uses the same system for producing expressive behavior on stage as the system which produces expressive behavior in everyday life. This system is programmed into us by genetic heritage and by experience. The actor's job is to tap into this system, substituting a fantasy life for his "real" life. If the actor's imaginative life is potent and appropriate, if his body is free of major chronic tensions and of mannerisms, the expressive aspect of the work will occur and it will be both powerful and apt.

The organic approach is based on these unquestioned facts:

- mental experience and expressive behavior are inseparable and reciprocal,

- experience in either mode (mental or expressive) automatically provokes correlated behavior in the other,

- though contrived expressive behavior can evoke aptly related psychological experience and can initiate a valuable interactive spiral of feeling and expression, we are not capable of creating the full illusion of human behavior on stage by such purely imitative means,

- the stream of perception-feeling-thought called "sub-text" is the primary device (in fact the only effective one) for controlling the flow of expression at an adequate level of complexity with recognizably human rhythm.

The organic approach is what we use whenever we want the actors to seem like human beings (or like beings of any kind for that matter, great lizards and universal robots included).

Audiences respond to familiar cues in interpreting and reacting to drama. Effective drama can only be made of these recognizable cues. These cues are subtle and extraordinarily complex; the audience doesn't know how it interprets them because the work almost always is done preconsciously, and necessarily so because of the complexity. But any inappropriateness in rhythm or content, any inconsistencies or contradictions in verbal and non-verbal expression, anything which does not "make sense" within the repertoire of the audience's understandings will dispel the illusion that this is life we are being shown. It doesn't matter whether we are doing Brecht, Euripides, Gorki, Shakespeare, Congreve, Moliere, or whomever; the life is what matters. It has nothing to do with the specific style of the play. The organic approach enables the illusion of life and this illusion is what gives power to drama.

Style is both the shape of a possible world in which this life lives and a strategically individualized means of telling about the life.

Style is what is lived and the organic approach is what makes it live. Please understand me: I am not saying that all plays should be performed naturalistically; I mean that "believability" is a separate matter from style. All plays need believability, no matter how highly abstract they may be, no matter how alien the world in which they occur. That believability depends on the aptness, clarity, complexity, and spontaniety of the familiar expressive cues.

Let me remind you that not only periods and genres have individual styles but also individual characters. For a sweet Arkansas coed to play a raunchy New York harlot may require a more profound stylistic leap than to play in 17th century comedy. The acting problem will be the same in both cases: to internalize the patterns of perception, feeling and thought required of the role and to free and develop the body so that it may spontaneously and fully express that sub-text.

A few general words on style and then I will integrate the two ideas. As they say, we fail to pay attention to those things which are the most fundamental in our lives. (We don't know who first noticed water, but we're sure it wasn't a fish.) So it is with style. It is as important as any factor in all our social interactions. We will marry, divorce, murder, or go to war over small matters of style, though we usually don't realize or admit that this is the cause. Our perception, feeling, thought, speech, dress, kinetic behavior, everything we do is done "in a style." That is to say, none of these things is pre-determined by the fact that we are human; all is learned, chosen. Although we customarily delude ourselves about it, telling ourselves that we are simply behaving naturally or appropriately (while others who are unlike us in style seem artificial,

contrived), the fact is that all matters of style are strategies of communication, at least predominantly so. Personal style is, above all, our way of identifying with whatever group we believe will best help us to survive and prosper. And, of course, it is our way of expressing rejection of others as well. Usually, we evolve our style very slowly, pre-consciously adopting those stylistic techniques which seem to work. There is no natural or absolutely appropriate style for doing anything. There is no specific way of talking, speaking, thinking, dressing, or whatever that is correct, natural or necessary. Style is always relative to a given situation and goal. It is a way of coming to terms with a situation and reaching a goal. This is so even for those who disavow any interest in style. That disinterest in itself is a stylistic communication. There is no way to escape style. It is with us in all things, at all times. There is no unstylized dress or behavior, there are no unstylized plays.

All clothes are costumes, of course. Implicit in every costume is an idea of what a good and proper person is, of what affectation and artifice are, of <u>what matters</u> in life. We all pay attention to what matters and ignore most of what doesn't. (This includes both your best and your worst students. They both do what seems to matter most.) The problem is that "what matters" is a purely relative matter, relative first of all to the most individual things about us, our understandings and our goals. For some, what matters is the moment and for others, the future. For some, the physical world matters most; for most uf us, however, the social world matters per-eminently, and for a very few, the philosophical or spiritual world matters. These differences determine stylistic choices. They are the primary shaper of stylistic choice.

We can and do construct persuasive rationales for any style, but all styles are merely matters of rationalization. We aren't ordinarily aware of the rationalizations, but it is not hard to penetrate to them; just ask someone to change an aspect of his style and, when he resists, ask why it would be unpleasant or wrong. Then the rationalizations will start to flow.

All styles are, potentially, freely inter-changeable. No matter of style has an inherent meaning. The styles by which we recognize delicacy, modesty, crudity, heroism, foolishness all are no more than matters of convention, socially determined. Our problem is to recognize the social, psychological and physical effects of our stylistic choices.

All styles are consistent. It is only in the interpreting of the style of others that we find inconsistencies; of course, that means only that we have not guessed the rationale with which they have knit together their stylistic choices. Count on this: no one is, to himself, inconsistent, except in retrospect. Consistency is a purely relative matter. There is no objective fact of consistency or the lack of it. In trying to understand the style of another (in everyday life or in a script) our job is to persist in conceiving rationales until we find one that makes all of the character's choices inevitable. This is the actor's fundamental task. In Patricia Romanov's fine description of French social style, we find this line: "...under the (finery) many crudities remained. Men spat on floors and urinated in the stairways of the Louvre." When we consider such things, however, we must remember that the judgement of crudity is a projection from our own time and style. If a practice is general in a society, we may safely assume that it was not thought incongruous. Again, the trick is to find the rationale which produces the feeling of congruity.

Meanwhile, beware that temptation to project.

This matter can get complicated. Actually, most individuals in any time or place have a variety of styles, or at least they work many variations on one style. Don't you change your profanity level depending on the company you find yourself in? I personally find that I belch or fart in some company and not in others. Don't mistake this for hypocrisy or inconsistency. Any but the most neurotically rigid person retains a high degree of fluidity in his style, rocognizing that behaviors have different meanings in different contexts.

Here is a matter of style which puzzled me for many years: why is it that some actors can perform roles set in any time or place (say, Laurence Olivier, Sophia Loren) while others can only play in modern settings or narrow social classes (say, Frank Sinatra or Cary Grant...do you remember the low farce of their performances in The Pride and the Passion?) After I studied style for a few years, the answer was clear: there is, at any historic moment, a realm of stylistic choice which is time-and-place specific and another realm of more universal options, both of which realms fall within the limits of tolerance of a particular time and place. In everyday life and in dramas, individuals evolve personal styles which may be anywhere on the continuum which runs from strictly time-and-place bound to universal. Sinatra, Grant, Lana Turner, all fell at the specific extreme; Olivier and Loren fall near the universal end. Those who tend toward the universal are not necessarily more powerful but they are surely more broadly useful. Certain powers come with either extreme. Each tells us of something. One gives more information about peculiarities of the moment and the other about that which persists in human style. (Some actors are even of a mixed type; Tony Randall, for example, is a time-and-place

specific actor, but not for the time and place in which he lives.) Our actor training ideal has been to develop the universal because it makes so much possible and because time-bound factors tend to be of less interest and are also easily added by less fundamental means, such as script, costume, set, etcetera.

We could go on much longer generalizing about style but time doesn't allow. Our first task is to get the mechanics and uses of style clearly in mind. This requires probing into the function of style in your own life. Right now, the way you have chosen to sit and the shape of your sub-text as you respond to me, are matters susceptible to stylistic analysis and, like all matter of style, there are purposes underlying your stylistic choices. Don't think that you sit this way to be comfortable; that is an evasion, I'm afraid. The interesting question is, "why does this way of sitting and listening produce comfort in you?" If you ask such questions of your own and others' behavior often and persevere in it, you will have an amazing experience. You will begin to see, with a clarity and power that is undeniable, the conventional and tactical nature of all behavior. This will bring about two valuable things: (1) having objectified style as a factor in life, you will find the strategies and goals underlying stylistic choices, if not immediately apparent, at least readily accessible, and (2) aware of these strategies and goals, you will achieve much greater control. This applies equally to the living of your own life and to your work in the theatre. So long as you take style for granted, deny its profound effect in your life, or think of it vaguely, you will find your life and your work littered with areas of mystery, with black boxes that break the continuity of your understanding.

And now to consider the problem of acting in alien styles more specifically. I find 3 major failures to be common:

1) we tend to work externally and as a result, though we may pass some superficial information about the non-verbal style of a time and place, we do not evoke in our audience an understanding of the style, of its role and roots in that society. We make of the style an historic curiosity, not an access to an alternative social world.

2) we over-generalize the style, we train all the actors to behave in the same, simplified manner and so we suppress the individuality of the characters.

3) we confuse the real historical world with the world created by the playwright.

The solution to problem one is to use the organic approach, with all of the subltety and power of which it is capable, to create real creatures in and of whatever imagined world the playwright has implied. We begin this process, not by practicing the superficial mannerisms of the time but my internalizing the sensibility of the period and by understanding the stylistic strategies of that moment in the same accepting way that people of that world did.

We must allow ourselves to take nothing for granted. We must rationalize every behavior in a consistent way. We must believe. We must change our way of seeing and feeling.

This isn't easy. Life in society tends to lead us in the opposite direction, toward a narrower, more rigid set of stereotypes of perception, feeling and thought. This is why <u>one of our prime goals in actor training must be the restoration of perceptual and attitudinal fluidity</u>.

Games can be a terrific aid in doing this work. I do not much care for the traditional games such as the improvised tea party.
They have use, but they do not penetrate deeply enough. The most important

help the actor needs is to receive from others the sorts of reward and punishment for his character's stylistic choices that we all receive in real life. Any game which stings you when you get it wrong and comforts you when you get it right will help.

The problem of over-generalization is somewhat easier to solve. The director, if she is well-enough prepared, can lead almost any cast to what is needed. The historians have told us what the general style of the period was. This helps, and such information should be shared with the actors. But the unhappy fact is that the general style of a period is not the main carrier of information, particularly of character information. The general style serves as a defining context and no more. The heart of drama is character and action and these factors are conveyed primarily by playing against the general style of the period (or perhaps in relation to it). The audience needs to know the more general context, but it gets its meat from the variations on the theme worked by each role and in each new action. Most of the time spent on style in rehearsal and in the actors homework needs to be devoted to this individualization and to the rationalization of the individualization. This is what leads back to that all-important sub-text which controls the performance and creates the character and the action. And so we see that two of these common stylistic problems are solved by subtle use of the organic approach.

The final problem, confusing the real historical world with the world of the play, is solved by the director alone. If she understands fully that there is no general rule, that the playwright of any period has the choice of setting the play in the real world of his time, in one slightly like it, or in a fantasy world of his own devising, and if she is a subtle textual

interpreter, this pitfall can be avoided.

Let me close with a brief summary of a basic technique for dealing with style.

1) understand the general conventions of the period,

2) find the extent to which that style is the style of the world of the play,

3) synthesize a general style from the historical world and the playwright's world,

4) individualize each aspect of the play by filtering the general style through the character's history, goals, motives, perception habits, etcetera,

5) use the variations, the individualization, as the basic communicative device; don't act the style, act a set of attitudes and expectations, a line of perception, feeling, and thought, <u>within</u> and <u>"against"</u> the general style,

6) make this way of thinking, seeing, etc., <u>habitual</u> and then forget it, except to the extent that your character is self-conscious about his style.

An approach of this kind can do two useful things for us: it can lend credibility and power to our performances and it can greatly enhance the clarity and extent of what we communicate to our audience about these other social worlds.